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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: KARBALA: NOT MUCH SOFA TALK

Classified By: Senior Advisor Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) SOFA is not a hot topic in Karbala. Among the Provincial Reconstruction Team,s (PRT,s) contacts who have a view on the matter, opinions range from hardline nationalism ("Send all the Americans home now") to profit-oriented pragmatism ("Let Washington pay to stay however long it wants") to apprehension ("Iran will move into the vacuum created by the withdrawal of U.S. forces"). Interestingly, few Karbalans say the Iraq-for-Iraqis tinge of the Friday sermons of Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i -- Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's deputy here -- affect their thinking. On November 7, Karbala'i emphasized in his sermon that Iraqi territory must not be used as a staging ground for U.S. military operations on neighboring countries.

¶2. (C) SOFA was only raised once Senior Advisor Gordon Gray,s meetings during his November 2-3 visit. Independent Provincial Council member (PC) Kadhum Jawad Nour al-Safi, in an impromptu pull-aside following the departure from FOB Husayniyah of his PC colleagues, told Gray that the SOFA is not well understood by 95 percent of Karbalans. He urged the Embassy to publish its text and to make a greater effort to explain it to Iraqis. Gray replied that a text of the SOFA has been published in the Arabic-language press and that the Embassy has made personnel available to discuss the draft agreement with Council of Representatives members. (Note: Kadhum's brother, Ahmed Jawad, is a senior Sistani representative in Karbala, head of the Abbas Shrine. End note.)

A Poll Apart

¶3. (SBU) Meanwhile, a rather unusual local poll demonstrates that -- whatever their views on the SOFA -- many here regard Iraqi passports as a liability. Asked by the al-Rafidayn (Mesopotamia) Media Agency whether they supported adding an article to the SOFA requiring Washington to give all Iraqis U.S. passports, 80 percent of the nearly 1,500 Karbala respondents ticked the box next to "Yes, I endorse adding this article because it will provide Iraqis with freedom of travel throughout the world without waiting a long time for a visa and it also will enable Iraqis to live and work in the United States whenever they wish." The remaining 20 percent agreed with "No, I reject this idea because it would turn Iraq into American territory, impinge on Iraq's heritage and economy, and link Iraq completely with U.S. policies." Al-Rafidayn claims to have worked previously with the Zogby polling organization.

Comment

¶4. (C) Public apathy regarding the SOFA is not surprising given that the sole coalition force presence in Karbala is Forward Operating Base Husayniyah, home to the generally well-regarded PRT and military training teams. There appears to be little consensus other than it is time for Iraq to try

to stand on its own. That many here apparently would like to have the option to leave, and perhaps to live and work elsewhere, suggests a tacit acknowledgement that the country's transition from crawling to walking could be fraught with peril. End comment.
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